DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 413 620 CS 509 634

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TITLE	Cultural-Communication Empowerment Programs: A Summary Report.
INSTITUTION	State Univ. of New York, Albany. Dept. of Communication.
SPONS AGENCY	New York State Education Dept., Albany.
PUB DATE	1994-12-00
NOTE	13p.; For related documents, see CS 509 635-636. A publication of the Project on Culture and Communication.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adolescent Development; At Risk Persons; Community Influence; *Community Involvement; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Context; *Empowerment; Minority Groups; Models; Secondary Education; Skill Development; *Youth Programs
IDENTIFIERS	*Communication Strategies; *Cultural Communication Empowerment Programs; Life Transitions; Rites of Passage

ABSTRACT

A growing number of cultural, educational, and social service programs around the United States report success in reducing teenage school drop-out rates, unemployment, substance abuse, and pregnancy. Facilitators of these programs claim that long-lasting impact requires not only informing young persons about the real dangers of such behavior, but also providing intellectual and emotional rewards in the form of a sense of hope instead of despair and a feeling of connection to some larger community ("Time", Nov. 14, 1994). These programs are thus designed to empower youth at a time of life transition--especially during the middle-school years (ages 11-14)--when they feel most vulnerable and are most "at risk." Such programs have been the focus of review by the Project on Culture and Communication (University at Albany, SUNY, New York) for the past year. The primary task has been to survey available cultural-communication empowerment programs and to develop relevant documents which are available to interested government agencies, educational institutions, and community groups. This report summarizes the Project's efforts to date, and also serves as a complement to a resource guide and a bibliography published by the Project. This report largely employs the words of key practitioners, researchers, community activists and government spokespersons in order to display the philosophy, the operationalization, and the assessment of cultural-communication empowerment programs. Contains 13 references. (Author)

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ED 413 620

Project on
Culture and Communication
A publication of the Department of Communication | University at Albany, SUNY | Winter 1994 - 1995

Cultural-Communication Empowerment Programs: A Summary Report

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December 1994

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The activities of the Project on Culture and Communication, including the research leading to the publication of this report, were funded by the New York State Education Department. No endorsement by the funding agency of the conclusions or interpretations contained in this report are implied. The authors are solely responsible for the contents of this report.

Introduction

A growing number of cultural, educational, and social service programs around the nation report success in reducing teenage school drop-out rates, unemployment, substance abuse, and pregnancy. Facilitators of these programs claim that long-lasting impact requires not only informing young persons about the real dangers of such behavior, but also providing intellectual and emotional rewards in the form of a sense of hope instead of despair and a feeling of connection to some larger community (*Time*, Nov. 14, 1994). These programs are thus designed to empower youth at a time of life transition -- especially during the middle-school years (ages 11-14) -- when they feel most vulnerable and are most "at risk."

Such programs have been the focus of review by the Project on Culture and Communication for the past year. Our primary task has been to survey available cultural-communication empowerment programs and to develop relevant documents which are available to interested government agencies, educational institutions, and community groups. This report summarizes our efforts to date, and also serves as a complement to a resource guide and a bibliography published by the Project.[1] This report largely employs the words of key practitioners, researchers, community activists and government spokespersons in order to display the philosophy, the operationalization, and the assessment of cultural-communication empowerment programs.

Overview of Cultural-Communication Empowerment Programs for Youths

We initially began our review of the literature and our census of model programs by studying resources which employed the term "Rite of Passage." This term is generally used to refer to the transition "journey" of an individual who acquires or competes for a new identity within his/her social group (in our case, the leaving of childhood and the entry into adulthood) and the participation of the whole community in this process, as well as the collective celebration upon successful completion. A variety of groups in the contemporary United States (including youth service agencies and non-profit agencies, as well as religious communities and educational institutions) are implementing programs that utilize the "rite of passage" model. Advocates suggest that this derivation from more traditional societies is an effective antidote to the ill effects of modern society.

As we began to survey programs, however, we saw that "rite of passage" programs are but one of several designed to provide youths with socially appropriate and culturally meaningful models for adulthood and for the attendant transition. Moreover, the "rite of passage" model has been implemented in significantly different ways by different groups (to be discussed in greater detail below), ranging from the "rite of passage" as the total focus of a program design to its inclusion as one part of a celebratory graduation ceremony for some other type of program. Thus, we felt compelled to extend the scope of our survey to include what we have come to think of as "Cultural-Communication Empowerment Programs." Such programs have one or more of three general goals:

> (1) to facilitate youth development by building and enhancing community-based programs which enable a local community to take responsibility for families and youths;
>
> (2) to provide youth with a cultural anchor through exploration and participation in meaningful ancestral rituals and through instruction in relevant cultural values, world views, and models of social roles (especially gender roles); and

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[1] Copies of this report, the bibliography, and the program resource guide are available from: The Project on Culture and Communication, Department of Communication, University at Albany-SUNY, Albany, NY 12222.

(3) to prevent criminal and other socially undesirable behavior before it becomes patterned in children and youth who are most "at risk" by facilitating the learning of social and communicative skills and the growth of positive inner strengths.

Each of these three goals is discussed below.

Rationale One: Community Participation in Youth Development

As noted, cultural-communication empowerment models assume that human development optimally occurs through community and group participation. Human development must be guided by elders, those senior members of the society who have a stake in its continuity, and whose wisdom may be of benefit to youngsters. Human development, when it occurs in isolation or without the benefit of adult mentorship, has the potential for creating untoward behavior.

> "[C]ommunity-based youth programs can build upon the cultural strengths of minority youth, respond to their unique needs and assist them in developing the necessary skills to become productive citizens.... Small community-based programs have the ability to respond quickly and flexibly, to attract alienated minority youth into culturally sensitive programs that build self-esteem and that motivate them to become educated and self-sufficient citizens" (Union Institute, 1990, p. 1).

One feature of empowerment programs is that they represent a fundamental philosophical and attitudinal shift in the ways social service programs have been administered and target populations have been approached: "The empowerment orientation represented a major shift in the 'assistance' paradigm: from *doing to* to *doing with*, from *power over* to *power with*, and from *teaching the client* to *collaborative learning*" (Dean, 1993, p. 9, italics in original). As Dean points out, this contrasts with what some have called the "deficit" orientation, in which target populations are not considered capable of assessing or correcting what is troublesome in their own lives. Programs which teach healthy parenting skills and/or involve adults in mentoring relationships with youths are examples of community-based development programs employing the new paradigm.

The philosophy behind "rite of passage" programming especially emphasizes the importance of community in human development: "[T]here is a need for persons who are moving from one position in our society to another to have some way to demonstrate their worthiness to assume the new position and there is a need of members within the society to have persons seeking new positions to demonstrate their worthiness to assume a new role and new responsibilities" (Butler, 1990, p. 8). Both the person and the social group benefit when development is not cast as an individualistic activity and when the community is fully engaged in the process. This dual function of such programs is well stated by Warfield-Coppock (1992): "The African American adolescent rites of passage process is aimed at instilling a strong, positive sense of self and achievement in African American youth and returning a sense of empowerment to African American families and communities" (p. 472). Relatedly, "it has been reported that persons who submit to rigorous rites of passage rituals develop a strong allegiance and commitment to the social group requiring the completion of initiation rituals" (Butler, 1990, p. 3).

Rationale Two: Striving for Cultural Awareness

Related to the first goal, but worthy of mention on its own terms, is that of building cultural awareness. If human development is to occur within social groups of responsible and caring adults, it is necessary for the community and the individuals within it to connect to historically-relevant models of personhood. Cultural-communication empowerment models provide youths with a sense of collective and personal ancestry. They remind youths of the multi-generational source of their own lives and provide culturally-valued guidelines for addressing issues related to gender identity and social relationships.

In order to accomplish this second goal, however, there must be some recognition that the American experience cannot, or should not, obliterate the national and ethnic heritage that waves of immigrants have brought to the United States. This may require a political and educational rethinking of the relationship between the larger American society and constituent immigrant cultures:

> "One reason little is known about culture [and its impact on youth development] is that traditionally **America has believed in a *melting pot* or assimilation theory as the basis for success in this society. the result has been to undervalue the existence and importance of distinct cultures, backgrounds and identities"** (Union Institute, 1990, p. 2, bold and italics in original).

Of course, such rethinking is not an easy task, since it begs the question of the kind of society America would configure itself to be if it were to eliminate the "melting pot" ideology. Nevertheless, the fact that children enter public schools, community centers, and the like, already socialized into contrasting cultural traditions, means that the agencies these children will encounter must, at a minimum, be sensitive to these backgrounds.

> "When white teachers are unaware of the cultural norms of their pupils and use their own culture as a reference point from which to judge a student's intellectual aptitude, misunderstandings typically occur.
> Such misunderstandings may later result in tracking, expulsion, and lowered expectations by teachers toward students" (Union Institute, 1990, p. 8).[2]

The need for culturally-sensitive empowerment programs is especially important for adolescents since the primary struggle at this age involves the expression of personal and gender identity, and it is here that the "rite of passage" literature urges group facilitators to provide appropriate and safe contexts for youths' identity explorations. In this regard, it is important to suggest that culturally-sensitive empowerment programs are based on a fundamental reconceptualization of what culture is -- i.e., a moving of culture inward:

> "Grave difficulties have been noted nationwide with this age group (11-14 yrs.). However, our curriculum developers have gone on their merry way in the social studies with approaches that mostly emphasize the physical attributes of culture -- agricultural patterns, geography, the founding of civilizations, governments, and wars. This *outer* approach all but ignores the important *inner* stage or 'threshold' that the Middle School student has just reached" (Martin, 1988, p. 37).

Part of the reason for this concern for the "Middle School student and his[/her] 'Inner life'" (p. 37) stems from a recognition that, at that period of life, adolescents experience the extreme losses of their childhood, and that "in many traditional tribal cultures (and some even today) formal rituals existed for helping usher out one stage, such as childhood, and to initiate the person into the next" (p. 38). In other words, the goals of appropriate community-sanctioned youth development as involving "rites of passage" and cultural awareness programming seem to converge. Thus, the inner experience of adolescent transition is paralleled by, and dealt with by, external rituals that are both socially and culturally meaningful: "The major problems are *inside*, and this was the area the initiation tried to reach" (p. 38).[3]

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[2] Please note the confusion of race -- in this case, White -- with having a culture. The relationship between race and culture is itself an issue educators and politicians must address.

[3] Adolescence may constitute a chaotic period. It is important that "rite of passage" activities not be so structured as to inhibit participants' experience and expression of such feelings. For example, Butler (1990) emphasizes the importance of program organizers' acceptance and development of "liminal" or

This dual function of "rite of passage" programs involves curricula which attend to the cultural backgrounds of students and which use this cultural knowledge as a basis for creating community-sanctioned transition rituals.

Rationale Three: The Prevention of Problem Behaviors through Development of Personal Skills

Finally, cultural-communication empowerment programs may be situated within the growing concern for "prevention strategies." While not unrelated to questions of human development and cultural awareness, this third rationale explicitly ties itself to the potential for problematic and anti-social behavior (violence, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, etc.) and seeks ways to prevent such behavior. Prevention is seen in terms of "inoculating" children against negative influences and empowering them to make positive life choices.

> "Over the past five years, federal demonstration programs funded by the Center for Substance Prevention have made significant advances in determining which prevention strategies work and which do not. At the same time, national nonprofit youth-serving organizations have developed highly successful, community-based youth development programs which help young people grow more resilient and resistant to alcohol and drug use and abuse. These programs also protect against many other risk factors youth face" (*Building Resiliency*, 1994, p. 1).

A cautionary note is sounded by some: one contributor points out that youth programs must be comprehensive, that although the reduction and elimination of alcohol/drug problems are important goals, these must be seen as part of an overall concern for youth development: **"We need to shift our thinking. We need to stop thinking of youth problems as the principal barrier to youth development and start thinking of youth development as the most effective strategy for preventing youth problems"** (*Building Resiliency*, 1994, p. 12, bold in original). Further, proponents of youth development programs are said to hold that, "while we develop strategies to prevent dangerous activities, we must be equally adamant about stating positive goals that we wish all young people to achieve and then begin helping them reach those goals" (p. 12). These goals include the following: a sense of safety and structure; belonging and membership; self-worth and a belief in one's ability to contribute to one's group or society; independence and autonomy; good relationships with others; and a sense of competence in physical, social, cognitive and vocational arenas. Many of these goals require learned skills in communication, both to enable people to assert their own thoughts and feelings, and to negotiate relationships with others.

The concerns for individual development and cultural awareness previously discussed are not distinct from the concern for programming that prevents the appearance of negative behavior patterns. All three are interconnected. For example, Butler (1990) writes that "young persons appear to be using and abusing alcohol as a ritual in their 'rites of passage' to adulthood, perhaps as a symbolic means to demonstrate their 'adultness'" (p. 2). In other words, drug and alcohol use -- as well as early sexual activity -- are means for adolescents without adult- or community-sanctioned "rites of passage" to initiate themselves and deal with the inner stresses associated with the developmental transition.[4] Comparably, in trying to explain teen suicide rates, Martin (1988) writes: "Now such 'exciting' milestones as getting a driver's license, getting a job, graduating from high school, turning 18 (no longer a 'minor'), etc. are about all that are left for today's youth to look forward to. Looking at the above list, suicide must look mighty attractive" (p. 38).

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unstructured components; these are said to foster a sense of ambiguity and rolelessness for participants, and encourage them to violate or explore the boundaries of previous standards and values.

[4] Of course, the use of alcohol as a means of self-initiation has severe disadvantages, which are described by Butler [1990]; rites of passage and drugging are structurally, not necessarily functionally, equivalent.

Protective factors relate to the concept of resiliency, which Linquanti (1992) defines thus: "Resiliency describes that quality in children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to the school failure, substance abuse, mental health and juvenile delinquency problems they are at greater risk of experiencing" (p. 5). Borrowing from the synthetic research conducted by Benard, Linquanti suggests that three factors in a child's family, school and community life provide for resiliency: "having a caring and supportive relationship with at least one person"; consistent communications to the child of confidence in his/her ability to succeed; and "providing ample opportunities for the child to participate in and contribute meaningfully to his or her social environment" (1992, p. 5).

The Range of Programs

Given the multiple, albeit interrelated, rationales described above, it is not surprising that a variety of empowerment programs have been proposed and implemented. Some programs attempt to address all three rationales within the same program design, while others concentrate on a single rationale. The following brief descriptions of three program types tie in, respectively, with the human development, the cultural education, and the prevention rationales described above:

The community-based human development focus is emphasized by Warfield-Coppock (1992) who lists six types of adolescent "rites of passage" programs: community-based ones (like Simba); agency-sponsored ones; school-based; church-based; therapeutic; and family organized. A survey conducted to uncover common program practices revealed that over 90% of the responding programs (N=20) listed "parent orientation," "field trips for the initiates" and "a final public ceremony acknowledging the completion of the rites of passage" as major features (Warfield-Coppock, 1992). Other highly ranked common usages included: staff and leadership training; retreats; a combination of public and private initiation ceremonies; and a requirement that program graduates participate in the initiation of the next "class."

The second goal, cultural awareness, is primarily accomplished through school curricula, although church and civic groups have also developed explicit ethnic heritage programming as well. One trend involves the development of all-male schools with an African American curriculum.

> "Multicultural education is taking root in many metropolitan public school districts that have large enrollments of minority students. Although it is gaining attention as a way to motivate and reengage minority youth's interest in learning, there is very little empirical data that proves multicultural education has such an effect. According to Faheen Ashanti, **'What's happening is that we've got to the point that people are willing to try anything now that looks like it might have a promise.'** Over the past five years Ashanti has been testing the effects of Afro-centric curricula on African American youth. He exposed 157 college students to yearlong classes on Africa and African Americans. The study proved successful; the student's grades improved overall by one letter grade" (Union Institute, 1990, p. 12, bold in original).

Another, less obvious, aspect of cultural awareness is achieved when young persons are taught and mentored by adults who not only share the same history -- and thus, the same societal challenges -- but who also share the same communicative style, thus validating the emerging personhood of the adolescent.

Finally, programs which add a drug avoidance component, or are primarily targeted to that goal, make a distinction between primary and secondary prevention programs. Primary prevention programs are those "designed for youth who have not yet started using alcohol or other drugs. They focus on reducing the number of new users and enhancing individual strengths against use" (*Building Resiliency*, 1994, p. 8). They include such strategies as information dissemination, prevention education, alternative programming (e.g., drug-free parties and youth retreats), and community-empowerment programs. Some emphasize directed activities for building self-esteem, for learning communication skills, for reaching out

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to others through community service. Secondary prevention programs are targeted to those youth who are already involved in drug and alcohol use, but who have not advanced to the stage of needing a comprehensive treatment program. In addition to programs targeted to the reduced use of alcohol and drugs by teenagers, many of the programs employ "rites of passage" to build a closer bond between at-risk youths and their communities.

Further Observations on "Rite of Passage" Programs: As noted above, "rite of passage" programs may be oriented to all three rationales (human development within a community context, cultural awareness, and resiliency). Within the range of programs described, there are two different approaches to designing "rite of passage" components. Each approach is briefly described below.

One approach to "rite of passage" programming primarily focuses on the individual about to experience the transition. This approach borrows somewhat from the tradition of Native American "vision quests" and/or the mythical accounts of journeys by heroes found in classical literature. Youth who participate in such "rites of passage" are challenged to embark on a guided spiritual exercise or to design their own challenges. Some programs provide wilderness or imaginative experiences, and some challenge the youth to learn new and challenging skills (like rope climbing). While individuals are supported both emotionally and physically by adults and peers, the emphasis of such programs is on individual achievement as a source of empowerment. Most examples of these programs come from communities, schools or organizations with the individual and/or collective resources to cover (sometimes high) program costs. While this approach may draw upon all three rationales discussed above, it is primarily oriented to fulfilling the third goal -- the development of individual skills and a sense of personal empowerment.

The other approach to "rite of passage" program design emphasizes the relationship among a group of young persons, and their relationship and responsibility to the ongoing life of the community. This approach is best exemplified by local programs within African American communities, in which adult mentors actively participate with young persons. This approach emphasizes the importance of community-based or interactive socialization (rationale one), although the other concerns certainly pertain here as well. In addition, members of the larger community benefit from such "rites of passage" because the culturally-relevant rituals and experiences serve to perpetuate the community's values and behaviors.

Studies of Success

Little research exists on the success rates of "rite of passage" and other cultural-communication empowerment programs. Warfield-Coppock's (1992) approach to this question included a self-assessment questionnaire which was completed by 20 African American initiation programs . The programs listed these features as indicators of what they perceived as a successful program (not exhaustive): "improved cultural awareness and knowledge"; "improved self-esteem"; "improved relations with elders ... and with members of the opposite sex"; and "improved school behavior and academic performance" (p. 479). Interestingly, only 40% of the programs surveyed used completion rates as a basis for success.

Time magazine (1994) reports that since the STARS program for youth in Fort Myers, Florida, started in 1991, the juvenile crime rate has dropped 27%, and 75% of the city's youth have a C average in school or better (up from 25%). The STARS program includes such activities as music, dance, sports, as well as tutoring.

One of the few "rite of passage" programs to be evaluated directly, the Rite of Passage Experience (ROPE@, copyrighted by David Blumenkrantz and Becce Reslock; Blumenkrantz, 1992), was first developed in Wethersfield, Connecticut, and has gained national recognition as a model for encouraging positive youth development. ROPE@, designed to involve parents and community leaders, is a 6- to 8-week curriculum for sixth graders which offers opportunities for the participants to learn decision-making,

problem-solving, and peer-pressure resistance skills. The program begins with low-stress, group problem-solving exercises and ends with an outdoor challenge, such as rock climbing or rappelling. The sixth graders who participate are asked not to tell younger children about their experiences in order to create a bit of mystery about the ritual for each succeeding class.

Quantitative evaluations of ROPE@ were conducted by researchers from Yale University with the State of Connecticut. Survey questions measuring attitude change based on a pre-test/post-test design were administered to ROPE@ students. Compared to a control group from comparable schools, ROPE@ participants showed significant improvement in their ability to communicate with and be involved with family, increased positive feelings toward family and school, and an improved sense of connectedness. While acts of major delinquency did not increase or decrease for the ROPE@ group, the number of such acts did increase for the control group (Hawkins, in Blumenkrantz, 1992, pp. 158-159). In qualitative assessments provided by the ROPE@ students, "about 50 percent ... responded that they had learned about cooperation, working well with a group, self-confidence or belief in power to do things once thought difficult or impossible, making decisions, and trust" (Blumenkrantz, 1992, p. 159).

A combined cultural awareness and "rite of passage" program also reported positive results. Thompson's (1992) study employed an "Africentric curriculum" and an African transition ritual for a group of middle-school males over an 8-month period. All 13 participants "successfully demonstrated thirst for the knowledge that the school offers" (p. 23) by completing weekly assignments, and 10 out of 13 expressed strong motivation for academic excellence. No data involving control groups were collected.

Finally, other assessment studies exist on the motivations adolescents have for joining "youth corps programs" (Higgins, 1988), the comparative success of several diverse peer support programs (Kotloff, Roaf, and Ma, 1993), and the components of successful alcohol- and drug-abuse prevention programs (*Building Resiliency*, 1994).

Considerations in Creating Cultural-Communication Programs

Perhaps more important than outcome assessments for particular interventions, which may be difficult to generalize to other populations and programs, are the kinds of issues program organizers and facilitators suggest are key to successful implementation. We provide this summary, not because we believe there is a definitive "laundry list" of items that ensure success, but rather to indicate the kinds of details and concerns that must be attended to as one sets about to facilitate a cultural-communication empowerment workshop, to enter into a contract with a known consultant, and the like.

The fellows of the Center for Public Policy, a Washington-based think tank, offer the following summary of what their respondents believe are key elements of a successful youth policy:

- **"Programs must be designed to meet the specific needs of the community they intend to serve. They must reflect the demographic composition of the community and must remain flexible to respond to changes within it"** (Union Institute, 1990, p. 14, bold in original).

- "It was agreed by those consulted that **all aspects of youth serving programs, including personnel, literature, and services rendered, must be respectful of and attempt to reflect their clients' cultural identity**" (Union Institute, 1990, p. 15, bold in original).

The *Building Resiliency* (1994) project identifies key elements of programs that work in terms of youth development and substance abuse prevention. We have selected five elements to consider:

- Programs should be comprehensive, rather than targeted to "a single risk factor (such as frequent use, early sexual activity, depression, anti-social behavior, low school achievement, etc.)" (*Building Resiliency*, 1994, p. 23).

- Programs should be built as an "infrastructure of coherent, integrated service systems" (*Building Resiliency*, 1994, p. 23) rather than being based on a single prevention strategy. Related to this, Linquanti (1992) emphasizes the importance of collaboration and integration of services across agencies and community groups.

- Programs should emphasize "positive youth development" (*Building Resiliency*, 1994, p. 23) rather than merely the prevention of undesirable (negative) behavior.

- Programs must match services to objective assessment of the individuals' and community's needs, rather than "matching people to slots" (*Building Resiliency*, 1994, p. 23). Dean (1993) makes the related point: "Clients, who usually know precisely what their families need, often perceive the [case-]worker as a villain who withholds resources or tries to shoehorn them into available services" (p. 8). Consistent with the empowerment approach described above, Linquanti (1992) suggests that the traditional needs assessment should be supplanted by a "community capacity map [which] allows a community to uncover and catalog its own strengths and assets" (p. 7). In other words, the community must be willing to enter into a period of introspection about its circumstance and that of its problem youth, but should do so in a way that enables it to feel empowered itself by the process.

- Programs should "integrate family, school and community" (*Building Resiliency*, 1994, p. 23) and not operate in isolation or treat the individual as an isolate. The simple concept of collaboration is relevant here: "In resiliency-based collaborations, all of us are required to work together, within and across families, schools, and community organizations, to build environments that protect kids by developing their social competence, problem-solving skills, and a sense of their own autonomy, purpose, and future" (Linquanti, 1992, p. 10).

Dean (1993) adapts Barr and Cochran's list of skills that agency workers should be expected to have as foundations, government agencies, and service providers move from the deficits to the empowerment model described throughout this report:

- the ability to listen to others and reflect critically on their circumstances.

- the ability to treat others as individuals with strengths that need acknowledgment and fostering.

- a sense of empowerment in their own lives.

- the skill to share decision-making, to collaborate with others so as to avoid "turf" struggles, and to build teams and communities.

Perhaps Linquanti (1992) provides the best summary of the goals of such programming, and therefore the criteria to be embedded in any such work:

> "These perspectives form the contours of a new paradigm that challenges collaborating service professionals: getting community ownership, not just representation; developing and utilizing people's strengths, capacities, and assets, not targeting and treating their deficiencies, weaknesses, and problems; and moving beyond risks to actively engage children and develop their competencies" (p. 4).

Finally, one report acknowledges that community groups may not be able to meet all the above demands on their own, and so encourages state-sponsored programming (de Lone, 1987). The executive summary describing programs that work suggests the following organizational requirements:

- coordination at the state level.
- "incentives for local participation and creative leveraging of state resources" (de Lone, 1987, p. iii).
- encouragement of the interplay between creative solutions generated at the local level and cogent state-level guidelines.

Summary

The Project on Culture and Communication offers this summary of our work to all educators, parents, clergy, community and government agency workers, and others concerned with the relationship between youth development and larger societal and cultural trends. Our work reminds us that youth development does not occur in isolation from prevailing societal and cultural patterns and values, and that the social collectivity has a responsibility to provide for personally healthy and socially responsible youth development. Cultural-communication empowerment programs are designed to correct severe fractures in our society, and ultimately benefit both the target youth and society at large.

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